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# **From state socialist to neoliberal productivism: disability policy and invalidation of disabled people in the postsocialist region**

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## **Abstract**

This paper criticizes the negative impact of productivism on disabled people of working age in the postsocialist region of Central and Eastern Europe. Productivism is conceptualized as a mechanism that generates cultural and material invalidation of those considered to be unable to work. The analysis begins by outlining some political-economic features of state socialism that underpinned its productivism, emphasizing commodification of labor. It proceeds by discussing the ensuing approach to social policy, comparing it with two alternative models. Afterwards, it highlights several ways in which productivism shaped disability policy in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc. Finally, the analysis looks at present-day disability policy in the postsocialist region. It is argued that after 1989, the state-based productivism of the socialist regime was partially complemented and partially displaced by the market-based

productivism of the new neoliberal regime. The conclusion discusses strategies for resisting productivism, focusing specifically on decommodification of labor.

### **Keywords**

productivism, disability policy, state socialism, postsocialism, neoliberalism, social policy, work ethic, commodification of labor

### **Introduction**

Seminal works in the sociology of disability (e.g. Finkelstein, 1980; Oliver, 1990; Stone, 1984) have demonstrated that the analysis of large-scale economic, political and social transformations – such as the one from feudalism to industrial capitalism – is indispensable for understanding and critiquing present-day approaches to disability. The transition from state socialism to postsocialist capitalism in Central and Eastern Europe invites similar considerations – the genealogy of disability policy in postsocialist countries necessarily leads back to their state socialist past. However, the topic has attracted little attention. Apart from a few notable exceptions (e.g. Phillips, 2009; Rasell and Iarskaia-Smirnova, 2014), disability studies scholars have so far disregarded state socialism and its postsocialist legacy. On their behalf, sociologists specializing in area studies have preferred to focus on other axes of

difference such as class, gender, or ethnicity, often considered more important than disability in exploring issues of power and socio-economic in/justice in the post/socialist region.

Proceeding from these general considerations, the present paper will look at disability policy under state socialism and its development after 1989 in order to shed light on contemporary forms of invalidation experienced by disabled people in the postsocialist region of Central and Eastern Europe. The distinctiveness of the proposed analysis stems from its cross-regime perspective – unlike analyses that emphasise capitalist relations of production or consumption as the source of disablement (e.g. Albrecht, 1992; Oliver, 1990; Russell, 2001), the present work foregrounds a mechanism of invalidation that is common to capitalism *and* state socialism. Furthermore, combining critical reflection of state socialism with critiques of postsocialist neoliberalization provides a novel lens for evaluating current strategies for disability emancipation.

More specifically, the analysis focuses on state socialist and postsocialist *productivism*, emphasizing its negative impact on disabled people's lives and identities. Productivism is regarded as a mechanism that reduces humans to resources utilizable for the enhancement of productive output. As such, it is a manifestation of 'instrumental reason' (Schechter, 2010) bound up with specific material conditions of living, and particularly of working. The genealogy of productivism can be traced back to the Protestant ethic that attached to mundane,

worldly activity the aura of moral obligation and ‘religious significance’ (Weber, 1930: 80). The ensuing capitalist work ethic contributed to maintaining a disciplined work force that fuelled the growth of industrial capitalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> c. Drawing on Weber, Giddens (1994: 175) has defined productivism as an *ethos* in which work, in the sense of paid employment, ‘becomes a standard-bearer of moral meaning – it defines whether or not individuals feel worthwhile and socially valued’. Hence the first problem with productivism – in a productivist society, those who are considered unable to work get culturally devalued (stigmatized). At the same time, productivism is more than an ethos – it is a mechanism which, besides the cultural element of moral-psychological compulsion to work, is also constituted by material coercion to work. In Marxist terms, specific relations of production under capitalism, conditioned by the ownership of the means of production, coerce the majority of people to engage in wage labor in order to subsist (Marx, 1978). Hence the second problem with productivism – in a productivist society, those who are considered unable to work get materially marginalized (impoverished and segregated).

Productivism is morally wrong on a number of accounts, but particularly because it leads to cultural and material invalidation of those who are regarded by the productivist system as unable to work. Productivism invalidates the elderly due to the actual or perceived decline of productivity with age; children are also affected due to instrumentalization of childhood and marginalization of free play. Yet the focus of this paper is on the productivist invalidation of

disabled people of working age. Their exclusion from paid employment has become a routine feature of everyday life in postsocialist countries, as the following brief telephone exchange, reported in a periodical of a Bulgarian disabled people's organization, illustrates:

Excuse me, is this the Employment agency?

Yes.

I would like to know how to register with you and how could you help me to find a job?

Come to our office, floor..., room...

Thank you, but there is a problem. I am using a wheelchair and your building is inaccessible – there is no ramp, elevator.

Using a wheelchair... and you are looking for a job?! (Metodieva, 2004: 11)

The discussion of struggles against such exclusions will be postponed until the concluding section of the paper, where I will argue that under conditions of postsocialist productivism, the campaigns of disabled activists for the 'right to work' have tended to sustain invalidation instead of challenging it. On the following pages, I will first outline some political-economic features of state socialism that underpinned its productivism. Second, I will highlight the distinctive features of productivist social policy by comparing it with alternative models of social policy, utilizing a classification developed in the early 1970s by the British social scientist Richard Titmuss (1974). For my present purposes, Titmuss's classification of welfare

systems is preferable to the more recent and popular one developed by Esping-Andersen (1990), because the latter excludes state socialist countries, whereas Titmuss's (1974) analysis takes them into account, thus enabling cross-regime comparisons. I will then explore an 'insider' account of state socialist social policy and will proceed by having a closer look at several key ways in which productivism shaped disability policy in the state socialist countries of the former Eastern Bloc. Finally, I will look at the links between this state socialist legacy and present-day disability policy in the postsocialist region. Of specific interest will be the reassertion of productivism in the aftermath of 1989, when the state-based productivism of the socialist regime was partially complemented and partially displaced by the market-based productivism of the new neoliberal regime. The conclusion will discuss strategies for resisting productivism and, accordingly, for overcoming the productivist invalidation of disabled people, arguing for decommodification of labor.

Before proceeding, a methodological disclaimer is needed. State socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe were not the same, notwithstanding the high degree of convergence between their economies, policies and cultures. Surely, the Soviet blueprint was applied widely yet unevenly across the region. Similarly, the postsocialist period has been characterized by variations and local idiosyncrasies in the pace and thoroughness of displacing the socialist legacy and implementing the new neoliberal blueprint. For example, Bohle and Greskovits (2007) have identified three distinct forms of capitalism that have emerged in the postsocialist

region in path-dependent ways – neoliberalism in the Baltic states, embedded neoliberalism in the Visegrád states and neocorporatism in Slovenia. That said, the motivation for this study is critical rather than descriptive – the aim is to understand and criticize the general forces that underpin specific forms of material and cultural invalidation of disabled people in the region. Perhaps more than anything else, it is the *recurrence* of invalidation within and across the two regimes that calls for a critical, macro-sociological mode of inquiry. Repetition suggests a generative mechanism that is not accessible through micro-level and/or strictly empirical methods. It may be the case that the name ‘productivism’ is not adequate for designating this mechanism, but the mechanism itself seems real enough in its effects in order to require naming and analysis.

### **State Socialism and Productivism**

As an economic, political and social regime, state socialism originated in Russia – its genealogy points back to the October Revolution of 1917. Although the Bolshevik Revolution could be seen as a genuine attempt at human emancipation – as, for example, Trotsky and his followers have argued (Mandel, 1949, 1978) – it was nevertheless compromised in its immediate aftermath. According to Mandel (1949), the international isolation brought about by the failure of the proletarian revolutions in Central and Western Europe in the period 1918-23 precipitated a structural ‘degeneration’ of the Soviet workers’ state. This degeneration manifested itself in



the rise of Stalinism (Mandel, 1978) and determined the general contours of what would eventually develop into an over-centralized state socialist regime that spread throughout Central and Eastern Europe following the Second World War. Mitigated by the process of de-Stalinization in the 1950s, the regime endured until the end of the 1980s, when it disintegrated and was substituted by (a transition towards) market capitalism. In contrast to capitalism, state socialism was characterized by state ownership of the means of production, one-party rule and centralized economic planning (Lane, 1996). The industrial policy of the socialist state entailed centrally imposed production targets in the form of periodically updated ‘five-year plans’. The prices of goods and services were also regulated, although the emphasis was on production rather than consumption. By maintaining full employment, the socialist state strived to mobilize the whole of its working age population in enhancing industrial development and growth. This, according to Lane (1996: 5), ‘provided a form of industrialism which was an alternative to capitalism and concurrently a counterculture to it’.

Whereas capitalism emphasized freedom, private property and the primacy of the individual, socialism emphasized equality, public property and the primacy of the collective. And yet, wage labor and the attendant coercion to work remained a common feature of the two systems, with the proviso that in state socialism *everybody* was supposed to be a worker. Thus the system generalized wage labor to include the whole of society (even the ruling bureaucrats were not exempt, as Mandel [1978: 40] points out) – the income from employment was to be

the sole source of support for people of working age, while rent and profit were to be abolished. If with the rise of industrial capitalism the labor-power of those who did not own means of production got commodified (Marx, 1978), the rise of state socialism, by ‘nationalizing’ the means of production, incorporated in this process former capitalists as well. The latter joined ranks with the workers in being coerced to sell their labor for a wage. Ironically, this generalization of wage labor has been among the key features that have prompted some analysts to define state socialism as an extreme variety of capitalism or ‘state capitalism’ (Tamás, 2011). Tamás (2011: 26) explains the apparently paradoxical mechanism of commodification of labor under conditions of public ownership of the means of production thus:

‘the people’ allegedly took possession of capital [through nationalizations]. But ‘property rights’ were not exercised by individuals or communities of workers, and the wage system remained in place. Surplus was reinvested by agencies separate from and independent of the working class, and consumption quotas were established by similar, also separate, agencies. The fusion of producer and means of production would also have meant a tendential suppression of the social division of labour that never happened.

The universal commodification of labor under state socialism was driven as much by the political aim of abolishing class divisions as by economic and political necessity. State socialist countries needed to accelerate their industrial development in order to overcome their economic backwardness and improve their ability to compete militarily as well as economically with the capitalist West. The consequence was the development of excessively productivized societies that ‘mobilised their populations in the service of rapid economic growth and a future-oriented ideology; they applied science and technology systematically to the production process and Taylorist techniques to the labour process; and they imposed performance targets on employees within all social institutions’ (Dale, 2011: 3). Thus state socialism appropriated not only the material relations of production under capitalism – ‘the separation of the producers from the means of production’ (Tamás, 2011: 25) – that coerced people to sell their labor for a wage, but also the (quasi)scientific, Taylorist organization of the labor process that sought to maximize its efficiency, human ‘costs’ notwithstanding. This was complemented by promoting a version of the capitalist work ethic (Lane, 1996: 54) in the guise of a ‘communist attitude to work’ (discussed below). The specific approach to social policy of the state socialist system was conditioned by these heterogeneous structures and processes that sought to subordinate public and private lives of people to the imperatives of industrial production.

### **Three Models of Social Policy**

In accord with its materially and culturally embedded productivism, state socialism regarded social policy primarily as an instrument for the mobilization of population for the purposes of production. Titmuss (1974) designated this approach to social policy as the 'Industrial Achievement-Performance Model'. In it, institutions of social support are regarded as 'adjuncts of the economy', the guiding principle being that 'social needs should be met on the basis of merit, work performance and productivity' (Titmuss, 1974: 31). Accordingly, social policy is summoned to enhance production by making and keeping people work-ready (qualified, fit, healthy, motivated). Those deemed as lacking in productive capacity such as disabled people are entitled to support, but it is conditional on their inability to work rather than on substantive considerations such as social justice or independent living.

Titmuss identified two other models of social policy in his review of actually existing welfare systems. In the 'Residual Welfare Model', rather than being a major tool for improving economic output and/or rewarding productivity, social policy is a minor, means-tested mechanism for last-resort and temporary relief provided to the neediest – all others are expected to cope with social issues and satisfy their social and 'care' needs privately. Thus 'only a marginal role is allotted to government – to collective social policies – and then only in respect of an assumed small proportion of the population – the very poor or public assistance sector' (Titmuss, 1974: 121). Alternatively, in the 'Institutional Redistributive Model', social policy is summoned to offset historically and structurally created disadvantages or to provide

‘compensation for disservice caused by society’ (Titmuss, 1974: 89), thus minimizing social inequalities in the name of social justice.

Titmuss’s Institutional Redistributive Model implies *decommodification*, although Titmuss himself does not make recourse to this term. The concept has been used by Esping-Andersen (1990: 21-2) in elaborating his own tripartite classification of capitalist welfare-state regimes: ‘De-commodification occurs when a service is rendered as a matter of right, and when a person can maintain a livelihood without reliance on the [labor] market.’ People are decommodified when the coercion to work for a wage is minimized. In post-agricultural societies, such a coercion is experienced by all those who lack alternative sources of income (rent, profit) – that is, by the majority of people. Decommodification could be achieved through various social policy interventions, given that the provision of alternative means of subsistence diminishes the need to sell one’s labor irrespective of the conditions of employment. But not all social support decommodifies people – neither the stigmatized, meagre social assistance provided as a last-resort measure to the neediest, nor the support that is conditional on labor market performance would qualify (Esping-Andersen, 1990: 22). With regard to Titmuss’s classification, it seems clear that whereas decommodification is a key function of social policy in the Institutional Redistributive Model, it is not supported or is actively discouraged by the other two models.

The models identified by Titmuss, although referring to actual policies, are theoretical abstractions or ‘ideal types’ in the sense that the actually existing social policy systems combine elements from each of them. Nevertheless, it is usually possible to identify a dominant model that underpins most social policy institutions, discourses and practices within a country or a region. Furthermore, identifying the dominant model helps with highlighting the basic – albeit often unarticulated or taken-for-granted – assumptions that are embedded in a particular social policy system. Titmuss’s classification could be further developed along these lines by suggesting that a social policy dominated by the *productivist* Industrial Achievement-Performance Model tends to regard people as *useful entities* – ‘resources’ to be utilized for the purposes of production; a social policy dominated by the *laissez faire* Residual Welfare Model tends to regard people as *autonomous entities* – self-sufficient, self-interested, atomistic individuals; and a social policy dominated by the *welfarist* Institutional Redistributive Model tends to regard people as *social entities* – community members embedded in structures of unequally distributed resources and life-chances. From the perspective of citizenship (Marshall, 1950), the productivist model emphasizes ‘industrial citizenship’, the laissez faire model – ‘civil and political citizenship’, and the welfarist model – ‘social citizenship’.

As also testified by the use of the ‘social model’ within disability studies (Oliver, 1990), the ‘modelist’ analysis of social policy proposed by Titmuss highlights fundamental assumptions about the meaning of human being that would otherwise remain invisible,

dispersed in a myriad of seemingly unrelated institutions, discourses and practices. Furthermore, the comparison between the models makes it possible to defamiliarize and challenge these fundamental assumptions and, accordingly, their power to shape identities, sustain values and guide actions. The assumptions are not free-floating, though. Without suggesting a deterministic or economistic, ‘base-superstructure’ type of relationship, it is important to emphasize the mutual conditioning that obtains between the ideality of understandings and the materiality of political-economic structures. As suggested in the previous section, state socialist productivism was a response to the imperatives of accelerated industrialization under conditions of economic backwardness and regime competition, which legitimized the generalization of wage labor to include the whole of society. It is therefore impossible to effectively challenge the productivist reduction of human beings to resources and the attendant invalidation of disabled people as ‘inefficient resources’ (Mladenov, 2011) without decommodifying human labor.

### **State Socialist Social Policy**

In this section, the abstract conceptualization of state socialist social policy as ‘productivist’, aided by Titmuss’s (1974) classification, will be substantiated by a close reading of an ‘insider’ document – an overview of Bulgarian social policy written in mid-1970s by two Bulgarian social policy experts (Golemanov and Popov, 1976). Bulgaria initiated its transition to

socialism in 1944 and by the end of the 1940s the new regime was firmly established. When Golemanov and Popov's overview was published in 1976, the Bulgarian socialist state had already fully developed its characteristic social policy institutions, discourse and practices. The document utilized a booklet format and was printed by a major Bulgarian publishing house in an English translation, with the obvious purpose to build a positive image of the Bulgarian socialist society abroad. Reproducing the 'future-oriented ideology' (Dale, 2011: 3) of the regime, Golemanov and Popov (1976: 6, original emphasis) introduce Bulgarian social policy as *'a powerful lever for the steady improvement of the people's living standards, for the all-round advancement of society and the accelerated construction of a communist social system'*.

The productivism of the state socialist social policy is manifested in different ways throughout the document. First, the users of social support are identified on the basis of their work status – the text describes its target group as 'the people who are the potential (future), the functioning (currently active) or past, functionally exhausted work force' (Golemanov and Popov, 1976: 10). Second, the document emphasizes the importance of making social support dependent on work performance – in line with the guidelines issued by the Bulgarian Communist Party in 1972, further development of the welfare system is envisioned with the aim of prioritizing good workers:



Front-ranking workers, employees and model cooperative farmers will have preference in using the social welfare funds (priority admission to holiday houses, resorts, thermal baths, in the distribution of scholarships, etc.). The various kinds and forms of social security will be made indirectly dependent on the individual performance in one's job. (Golemanov and Popov, 1976: 12)

Binding social support to performance is legitimized by extolling work effort as 'the core of economic progress', and, furthermore, as 'the main factor for man's socialization and adjustment in the system of society' (Golemanov and Popov, 1976: 13). Thus, third, instead of striving to free people as much as possible from the coercion to work for a wage (that is, to decommodify human labor), the state socialist social policy is summoned to instill a work ethic by making people internalize a 'communist attitude to work' (Golemanov and Popov, 1976: 16). This means that:

Under socialism and communism work ceases to be a burden and becomes a vital necessity for every man, a condition for his all-round development and formation. This is achieved through optimizing the character of work, improving its conditions and actively influencing the people's world outlook. (Golemanov and Popov, 1976: 13)

Forth, even the work-free time is regarded as an instrument for enhancing one's productive capacity. The document criticizes the 'irrational use of free time' (Golemanov and Popov, 1976: 18). Accordingly, holidays are regarded as 'a form whereby the working people restore their capacity for work and are formed as all-round versatile individuals', or, even more emphatically: 'Holidays should be examined as an objective necessity to use the country's manpower resources more effectively by putting more free time at their disposal.' (Golemanov and Popov, 1976: 19)

All these elements – the rendering of users' identity in terms of their employment status, the emphasis on performance in allocation of support, the imposition of a work ethic, and the instrumental appropriation of work-free time – manifest the hegemony of productivism in social policy, as reflected in the official discourse of the 1970s in Bulgaria. The situation was similar in other state socialist countries. The high degree of convergence between these societies (Lane, 1996) meant that institutions, discourses and practices were relatively unified throughout the Soviet Bloc, including in the area of social policy. Soviet Russia, where social services 'function[ed] to sustain and glorify the work ethic' (Titmuss, 1974: 17), served as the model. To give but one more example, following Soviet guidelines, the policy of social welfare in the early years of the German Democratic Republic was conceptually, legislatively and institutionally framed as part of the labor market policy and the 'social security recipients were ordered to work, which had the character of "disciplinary measure and correction"' (Schilde,

2005: 169). As a result, some users of social support were ‘discriminated as non-productive people’ (Schilde, 2005: 170). State socialism substituted the right to work with the obligation to work, with dire consequences for disabled people.

### **State Socialist Disability Policy: Disability Assessment**

In contemporary societies, the access of disabled people to social support has been as a rule mediated by disability assessment (Stone, 1984). Reports and analyses of disability assessment in state socialist and postsocialist countries (International Disability Network, 2007; Mladenov, 2011; Phillips, 2009) disclose a recurring pattern of institutions, discourses and practices that could be summarized as follows: For the purposes of providing support, the state socialist administration rendered disability exclusively in terms of inability or decreased ability to work. This understanding was shaped, generalized, stabilized and normalized by setting up collective medical bodies (‘commissions’) to certify disability. The latter was reduced to privation of capacity to perform wage labor in mainstream settings due to medically determinable ‘deficiencies’. The medical expert commissions were located in hospitals and were entrusted by the socialist state with a virtual monopoly over the definition and identification of disability. The certificates issued by the commissions to the persons seeking support were all-important documents, ‘passports’ uniquely capable of granting access to services and benefits provided by the state to disabled people. They also contained prescriptions for work placement.

Following the already highlighted trend towards convergence, many socialist countries adopted this approach to assessing disability. Its origins are to be found in the Soviet disability policy:

The definition of disability, or *invalidnost*, as loss of labor capacity was a cornerstone of disability policy in the workers' state of the Soviet Union (Madison 1989), where citizens were required to engage in paid labor as a "socially useful activity." The citizen's social utility was measured in terms of one's potential role in production, and level of disability was assessed according to a scale of labor potential. (Phillips, 2009: n.p.)

The framing of paid work as 'socially useful activity' was an important element of the work ethic imposed by the socialist state to serve its industrialization agenda. It also legitimized the expansion of wage labor to all members of society. The attendant valuation of citizens according to their 'potential role in production' had as a consequence the invalidation of those deemed unable to produce. Capitalist industrialization required 'standard workers' whose worth was derived from their ability to 'function like machines' (Russell, 2001: 88) – i.e. in a disciplined, predictable, quantifiable fashion. State socialist industrialization reproduced this pattern. As a result, those with non-standard bodies and minds were materially excluded and

culturally devalued. Notably, citizens with intellectual and psychosocial impairments were amongst the most affected, because the approach that privileged people who ‘function like machines’ was particularly intolerant towards behavioral difference. In addition, disabled women experienced higher levels of invalidation than disabled men – notwithstanding the policy of including women in non-domestic labor, state socialism remained patriarchal (Tomova, 2009: 134-6) and, accordingly, maintained the association of femininity with domesticity and limited non-domestic productivity.

As already pointed out, the productivist state regarded its subjects as ‘industrial citizens’, in distinction from the ‘civil and political citizens’ of the laissez faire state or the ‘social citizens’ of the welfarist state. Phillips (2009: n.p.) is therefore right when asserting that the Soviet approach to disability, as reflected in the medical-productivist method of assessment ‘based on a person’s perceived “usefulness for society”’, was not identical with the approach of western laissez faire countries. And yet, she is wrong to suggest that ‘the Soviet state’s approach to disability was not really the “individual, tragic” model found in the U.S., Great Britain, and elsewhere and so criticized by disability rights advocates beginning in the 1960s’ (Phillips, 2009: n.p.). Disability was regarded as individual and tragic in state socialist societies as well, the difference being that, from productivist perspective, the tragedy was the (medically determined) loss of capacity to produce and, therefore, to be socially useful; whereas from laissez faire perspective, the tragedy was the (medically and economically determined) loss of

autonomy and, therefore, of self-sufficiency. Even if the capacity to produce was a key component of the latter, the laissez faire model of social policy placed equal if not stronger emphasis on one's capacity to satisfy one's needs privately.

By rendering disability exclusively in terms of inability or decreased ability to work, the disability assessment institutions, discourses and practices of the socialist state framed the issue as a productivist shortcoming originating in the functionally deficient body of the assessed person. The ideal was the fully functioning worker, against whom the disabled person was evaluated as lacking by medical professionals who conducted the assessment in medical settings and by using medical criteria. The degree of this 'lack' was expressed by allocating the individual undergoing the assessment to a particular 'invalidity' group. This mechanism of reducing disability to medically identifiable inability to work has survived the demise of state socialism and has continued to dominate disability assessment in postsocialist countries – examples include Armenia, Bulgaria, Estonia, Russia and Ukraine (International Disability Network, 2007; Mladenov, 2011; Phillips, 2009).

### **State Socialist Disability Policy: Social Services**

Besides the method for assessing disability, another expression of the productivism of state socialist disability policy was the coercion to work embedded in the social services provided

by the state to support disabled people. Once more, state socialist Bulgaria will be taken as an exemplary case. There, disabled people's entitlement to public assistance was first codified in the Decree on Public Assistance of 1951 (the document is reprinted in Nikolova and Stoyanova, 1997: 180-3). The aims of this legislation, as specified in its preambular section, were:

to cancel the laws of the past that tokenistically codify charity measures that are degrading for the working people; to introduce unity in the organization of public assistance by covering those persons not covered by public insurance – the blind and deaf-and-dumb, the orphans and half-orphans, the unable to work and solitary old people, and others, as well as to organize the work placement of invalids. (Nikolova and Stoyanova, 1997: 180)

The Decree of 1951 set the general framework for all subsequent disability policies and programs in Bulgaria. It was amended several times, in 1956, 1957 and 1984, but its key provisions remained unchanged and it continued to regulate public assistance until 1998, when it was substituted by the new Law on Social Assistance. The legislative construction of disability devised by the Decree of 1951 was expanded and consolidated in several other juridical acts such as the Law on Pensions of 1958 and the Instruction No. 3931 on the Operation of Labor-Expert Medical Commissions of 1962 (substituted in 1975 by Ordinance No. 36). The resultant juridical discourse rendered disability exclusively in terms of

productivist limitations caused by individual bodily and behavioral ‘deficiencies’. This framework imposed a pathologized and socially inferior identity on people seeking disability-related support because it constructed disability as medically identifiable decrease in social utility (understood as capacity to engage in labor).

Article 3 of the Decree of 1951 enlists three major forms of support: (a) work placement (*trudoustroyavane*) and inclusion in ‘socially useful work’, for the purposes of which sheltered workplaces were set up; (b) establishment of social care institutions (*zavedeniya za sotsialni grizhi*); and (c) provision of benefits (*pomoshti*) (Nikolova and Stoyanova, 1997: 181). The fact that work placement was the first item in the list testifies to the primacy of this measure in Bulgarian disability policy of the time – this point is also emphatically asserted by Golemanov and Popov (1976: 29, original emphasis), who state that ‘[t]he basic form of social assistance in all socialist countries, Bulgaria included, is *adjustment to less demanding jobs*’. According to Articles 7-12 of the Decree, the access of disabled people to services and benefits is controlled by ‘medical labor-expert commissions’ (*lekarski trudovo-ekspertni komisii*), with those impaired during military service or in struggle against fascism being granted priority of access (Nikolova and Stoyanova, 1997: 181-2). Article 16 forbids begging – people caught begging are to be forcefully placed in employment or in social care institutions.



The legal framework elaborated in the Decree of 1951 initiated the development of a massive infrastructure of segregated provision for disabled people. The number of special enterprises and the people employed in them increased dramatically over the following two decades – in 1955, there were nine enterprises employing 372 disabled workers; until 1974, these number had risen to 64 enterprises with over 20,000 employees (Golemanov and Popov, 1976: 29). Institutions for social care proliferated with a comparable pace – in 1939, there were 26 institutions accommodating 915 residents, while in 1978 – 169 institutions with 19,312 residents (Hadzhiyski, 2002: n.p.). Similar to the expansion of sheltered employment, the expansion of institutional care was driven by a strictly productivist logic: ‘Should an able-bodied member stay back at home to look after a sick person, the family budget would be strongly affected and society would lose a work force unit that could be put to more appropriate use.’ (Golemanov and Popov, 1976: 32) In 1976, 25 years after the promulgation of the Decree of 1951 and 32 years after the inception of the socialist regime in Bulgaria, the vision for the development of disability policy was still one of expanding institutionalization:

Soon there will be boarding houses for the aged, handicapped and chronically ill in every district; their capacity will depend on the character of the inhabited place. Every district will have effective welfare establishments with a great capacity, permitting a more rational use of investments and more effective servicing, the concentration of

certain processes and the introduction of modern technology and apparatuses.  
(Golemanov and Popov, 1976: 33)

The segregated and employment-oriented provision of disability services, exemplified by the Bulgarian case, was widespread throughout the state socialist countries (Holland, 2008; Phillips, 2009; Rasell and Iarskaia-Smirnova, 2014). When combined with the medical-productivist disability assessment discussed in the previous section, this pattern of organizing disability support entrapped disabled people in a kind of a *productivist double bind*. On the one hand, social policy interventions coerced disabled people to work by placing them in sheltered workplaces and imposing on them a work ethic. Yet on the other hand, the same interventions prevented disabled people from working and, consequently, from acquiring the independence and status exclusively provided by paid employment in a productivist society. Disability assessment rendered impairment in terms of inability to work, thus simultaneously framing disabled people as resources and denying this status to them (Mladenov, 2011). Productive activity in sheltered workplaces was – and still is – grossly devalued in comparison to mainstream employment (Zaviršek, 2014). Furthermore, sheltered employment was routinely regarded in therapeutic terms, as rehabilitation, resocialization or readjustment (Golemanov and Popov, 1976), which undermined its meaning as work. The widespread confinement of disabled people in institutions for social care absolved family members from care responsibilities, ‘freeing’ them for participation in production, while simultaneously deterring

those in need from seeking support outside the system of wage labor (including by begging). This mechanism of deterrence was similar to the one established by the Poor Law policy in England (Stone, 1984: 38-9). In effect, medical-productivist disability assessment, employment segregation and institutional confinement disciplined disabled people to follow the imperatives of production, while also preventing them from doing so.

### **Postsocialist Disability Policy**

The productivist invalidation of disabled people survived the demise of state socialism, continuing to shape disability policy in postsocialist countries over the decades following 1989. The significance of the socialist legacy as a major determinant of the policy solutions concerning disability in the region has been highlighted in a number of recent analyses. Holland (2008: 546) has identified ‘a current situation that has not evolved markedly from the past’, referring to the massive infrastructure of residential facilities for disabled people created by the state socialist regimes in Visegrád countries – Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. Focusing on Russia and Ukraine, Phillips wrote in 2009 (n.p.) that, notwithstanding some improvements in disability rights, ‘many Soviet-era structures, institutions, and practices are still in place either de facto or de jure’. Mladenov (2011) has emphasized the state socialist origins of the medical-productivist disability assessment in contemporary Bulgaria, criticizing its invalidating effects. According to Zaviršek (2014), the new forms of sheltered employment

introduced in postsocialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe in the 2000s have tended to reproduce the segregation and stigma that characterized state socialist disability services.

Yet besides the socialist legacy, disability policy in the postsocialist region has also been shaped by global forces that have complemented the influence of the region's state socialist past (Rasell and Iarskaia-Smirnova, 2014: 4). A distinctive and markedly global feature of the period following 1989 has been the imposition of market-oriented reforms that could be subsumed under the general term 'neoliberalization' (Springer, 2013). These reforms have included privatization and deregulation, where market mechanisms intended to stimulate competition, self-sufficiency, profit seeking and consumer sovereignty have been introduced in key areas of postsocialist life such as the economy (Dale, 2011), political participation (Ost, 2000), civil society (Ishkanian, 2014), and social policy (Ferge, 1997; Wengle and Rasell, 2008). As far as the latter is concerned, the processes of neoliberalization pushed postsocialist countries towards what could be regarded as an evolved version of Titmuss's (1974) *laissez faire* Residual Welfare Model. The adoption of the alternative, welfarist Institutional Redistributive Model was impeded because the demise of the state socialist regime coincided with the demise of Keynesianism in the West (Jessop, 1993). It is in this sense that the fall of state socialism 'came too late' (Ferge, 1997: 20) – it was too late for transition countries to espouse the western welfarist model that, since the mid-1970s, had been gradually but steadily eroded by neoliberalization:

At the time of the revolutions of 1956 (Budapest), or even of 1968 (Prague), the “left” values of the Enlightenment could still play an important role, and “existing socialism” could be denounced as a sham and criticized as such in the name of “socialism with a human face”. In the new international climate of 1990 this was no longer possible: the rejection of “existing socialism” had to be categorical. (Ferge, 1997: 20)

The categorical rejection of ‘existing socialism’ was conflated by the postsocialist reformers with rejection of the Keynesian welfare state (Minchev, 2011). Thus after 1989, the welfarist option was blocked and postsocialist countries embarked on neoliberalization of social policy. The latter included retrenchment of support, promotion of market principles in the organization of provision and, since the beginning of 2000s, the introduction of *workfare* programs that have made support conditional on preparation for or participation in paid employment (Gould and Harris, 2012; Mladenov, 2015). Thus a new version of productivism partially complemented and partially displaced the old one. The result has been the reassertion of the state socialist devaluation of ‘those who may not be useful for “productive” purposes’ (Ferge, 1997: 30), albeit in a new guise.

What were the differences? Whereas state socialist productivism was interventionist and state-based, neoliberal productivism has endeavored to ‘govern at a distance’ (Rose, 1996)

and has been market-based. The former was harnessed for the purposes of centrally planned, ‘catch-up’ industrialization that required full employment, whereas the latter has served the purposes of enhancing competitiveness in decentralized and increasingly globalized markets that has required flexible (part time, temporary, short-term) employment. Nevertheless, the intensified coercion to work has remained a common feature. The generalization of wage labor under state socialism was formally abolished by the new regime that reinstituted profit and rent as legitimate sources of income. At the same time, the concentration of capital, the increasing socio-economic inequality, the impoverishment of large sections of the population, and the precariousness of employment under conditions of neoliberalization (Kalleberg, 2009; Springer, 2013) have meant that the coercion to work has de facto been constantly extended, affecting more people and pressing them harder.

In effect, disabled people in postsocialist countries were exposed simultaneously to two instantiations of productivism – the old, state socialist one, reproducing Titmuss’s (1974) Industrial Achievement-Performance Model, and the new, neoliberal one, reproducing the evolved, workfare version of the Residual Welfare Model. Productivist pressures redoubled. First, the mainstreaming of disability support after 1989 has been impeded by the institutional inertia generated by the massive infrastructure of heavily productivised, medicalised and segregated provision inherited from state socialism. This infrastructure, comprised of medical assessment bodies, sheltered enterprises and residential institutions, has perpetuated the

‘productivist double bind’ discussed at the end of the preceding section. Second, processes of neoliberalization have tended to retrench both segregated *and* newly mainstreamed support, including by way of continuously extending workfare conditionality.

## **Conclusion**

To recapitulate, productivism is a cultural-material mechanism that reduces humans to resources. Among its negative consequences is the invalidation of disabled people. The genealogy of productivism leads back to industrial capitalism of the 19th century. State socialism appropriated early-capitalist productivism by incorporating a modified version of the capitalist work ethic and generalizing the coercion to work for a wage. This resulted in adopting a productivist, performance-based model of social policy, distinct from the residual, *laissez faire* model and the redistributive, welfarist model. The impact on disability policy was the dominance of the medical-productivist understanding of disability coupled with stigmatized and segregated provision of disability support. The key elements of this productivist disability policy survived the fall of state socialism. After 1989, they were partly complemented and partly displaced by neoliberal retrenchment of social support and workfare conditionality. As a result, the productivist invalidation of disabled people has been reasserted and redoubled.

As far as agency and resistance are concerned, there have been numerous, persistent and courageous efforts of grassroots disabled people's groups and organizations for bringing about emancipation, social justice and positive valuation of disabled people in the postsocialist region (e.g. Holland, 2008; Mladenov, 2012; 2015). Surely, there were successes – some disability services were mainstreamed, strategies of 'deinstitutionalization' were implemented (but see Center for Independent Living – Sofia, 2013) and programs for the provision of personal assistance along the lines of the Independent Living philosophy were set up, albeit often on a decentralized basis and drawing on unsustainable, project-based funding (Mladenov, 2012). Yet the institutional inertia inherited from the old regime, as well as the austerity and conditionality imposed by the new one have generated intractable impediments to change, undermining struggles for social justice and independent living.

Furthermore, some advocacy efforts have been co-opted. Among other things, disability activist in the postsocialist region have insisted on respecting disabled people's *right to work* (Zaviršek, 2014). Under conditions of reasserted and redoubled productivism, though, the effects of such campaigns have been equivocal. On a global level, neoliberalism has tended to co-opt disabled people's advocacy for the right to work for the purposes of 'harnessing individual "employability"' (Soldatic and Meekosha, 2012: 198). Similarly, the advocacy of disability activists in the postsocialist region for the right to work has been 'resignified' (Fraser, 2013) into imposition of an obligation to work, with the attendant promotion of welfare cuts



and workfare conditionality (Zaviršek, 2014). Part of the problem is that both the instrumental reasoning of productivism and the material coercion to work for a wage are routinely taken for granted by disability campaigners – in the apt formulation of Hughes et al. (2005: 163-4), '[t]he transition from feudalism to capitalism may be a distant historical memory but it should not be forgotten that many disabled people are still fighting for the right to be wage slaves' (see also Russell, 2001: 94). It seems that the transition from state socialism to postsocialist neoliberalism has not changed this campaigning strategy either, notwithstanding that 'wage slavery' was generalized under state socialism, while the restructuring of economy and society under conditions of neoliberalization has instituted new pressures to work for a wage.

According to Abberley (1998: 89), 'just because a main mechanism of [disabled people's] oppression is our exclusion from social production, we should be wary of drawing the conclusion that overcoming this oppression should involve our wholesale inclusion in it.' The mere inclusion in mainstream settings without questioning the mechanisms of invalidation operating within such settings does not lead to emancipation. From the perspective of the present analysis, emancipation of disabled people calls for undermining the mechanism of productivism, particularly the commodification of labor. State socialism rejected decommodification as eroding the 'communist attitude to work', and neoliberal capitalism rejected it as creating and maintaining a 'dependency culture' (Mladenov, 2015). Both regimes have regarded paid work as the key condition for economic development, social cohesion and

personal integrity, although, as pointed out by Zaviršek (2014: 190), ‘not only unemployment, but also work itself, may cause social exclusion and create social outcasts’.

The overcoming of productivism is impossible without decommodification of human labor. Yet, as stated earlier, not all social support decommodifies people – both the last-resort assistance provided to the neediest and the assistance that is conditional on preparation for or participation in paid employment tend to enhance commodification rather than diminish it. Decommodification calls for universal and unconditional support. Disability activists in the postsocialist region will succeed in challenging the productivist invalidation of disabled people to the degree to which they manage to incorporate these principles in their campaigns.

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